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ABSTRACT

The paper is based on the findings of a two-year experimental counseling-reading program at Chapman College, completed in 1971. Objectives of the counseling part of the program include self-analysis, study skills, self-responsibility, liaison with other college classes, and personal problems. Behavioral objectives in reading fall under categories of rate, comprehension, vocabulary, flexibility, and analysis. Students involved in the program were preponderantly male and often several years older than their classmates; a disproportionate number were veterans. In most cases poor reading skills occurred with a galaxy of personal and attitudinal problems. The major purpose of counseling was to convince each student that he was an interesting, worthwhile person and that he could and would be helped to improve his ability to do college work. Individual conferences, small group experiences, and sensitivity groups were employed, coupled with a structural "contract" method for improved reading ability. (SES)

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A COUNSELING APPROACH TO IMPROVEMENT OF READING

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A COUNSELING APPROACH TO IMPROVEMENT OF READING

Rationale: Freshmen and transfer students who enter college on academic probation or with provisional standing often have a combination of reading handicaps and attitudinal problems which makes success in college unlikely, even on a limited (11-12 unit) schedule. Findings of research indicate that students receiving synthesized counseling and instruction in reading make better progress, become more flexible in their approach, and show improvement on assessments of personality. (19) (28)

With the increasing numbers of college students, and the broadening of college admissions policies to admit more students from economically deprived areas, efforts are redoubling to find ways of helping those students who enter college with academic deficiencies. Significant numbers of these students have been found to have poor reading skills and a galaxy of personal and attitudinal problems. This paper is based on the findings of a two-year experimental counseling-reading program at Chapman College, completed in June, 1970, by the writer.

WHO ARE THE STUDENTS?

Students who enter college, either as freshmen or transfers, with less than the usual GPA or acceptable performance in college preparatory subjects, are preponderantly male and often several years older than the student who comes straight from high school. The smaller percentage of women students in this group are also frequently older, and many have worked for several years or have been married. Both men and women students often hold part-time jobs in addition to their college work, and some of them are supporting families. The group includes a disproportionate number of veterans. Students of traditional college age in this category include some late-bloomers, who feel they "goofed-off" in previous schooling and are now anxious to make up for lost time, as well as a number whose major interest has been sports, art, music, and drama rather than so-called academic subjects.

KINDS OF ATTITUDINAL PROBLEMS

Most of these students have had unpleasant and unsatisfying academic experiences in previous schools. Lack of good reading and writing skills has often led to humiliating classroom experiences, parental nagging, and a feeling of inability to compete. Some of them have responded with hostility and anti-social behavior, and others with retreat into apathy and inertia. Many of them have difficulty in communicating with other people, even their peers. Poor self-image and lack of confidence in themselves is typical.

Frustration is especially great for the more intellectually able, whose ability to think and to speak often far outstrips their ability to cope with reading and coursework at the college level. Feelings of alienation and loneliness are often expressed. Test fear is common among academically deficient entrants, and ranges from "blanking out" at sight of a question to actual physical illness. Some of this stems from previous experience of failure on tests, and much from lack of knowledge and practice of good study habits.

Students range from the highly motivated to those with total lack of motivation. Most of them have in common an inability to choose priorities, or to develop and maintain a working schedule in line with their priorities. Deep distrust of the sincerity of their professors and the authors of their textbooks is often demonstrated. For many of them, these people represent part of a great conspiracy which is trying to trick them and outwit them. For these students, college is a continuing battle against an overwhelming force which uses inexplicable weapons and demands the impossible, rather than a stimulating learning experience. To the student whose reading vocabulary is so limited that "root" means only something that grows in the ground, the test question "Discuss the roots of the Civil War" is another example of a professor who is trying to outsmart him.

KINDS OF READING PROBLEMS

The median percentiles of initial reading test scores of freshmen and transfer students entering on academic probation in the Chapman program ranged from -1 percentile to the 97 percentile, with 45 per cent of the students in the first quartile range, 30 per cent in the second quartile, 16 per cent in the third quartile, and 9 per cent in the fourth quartile. Iowa Silent Reading Test, Advanced (13) was used as a diagnostic and evaluative device, despite research findings that its subject matter and norms are outdated. (6) Its uses as a teaching device, acquainting students with the various types of reading particularly applicable to college studying, and as a motivator to the reluctant reader in breaking down his reading problems to smaller, more easily attacked and conquered categories, as well as the fact that its subtests usually allow the student at least one successful score, outweighed its disadvantages in the opinion of the writer. All students were given this test. Survey of Reading-Study Efficiency (8), Study Habits Checklist (21), Wide Range Vocabulary Test (2), and the diagnostic tests in Gilbert's Breaking the Reading Barrier (12), are examples of tests also given to students as appropriate and when specific follow-up activities were planned. (31) Thirty-eight per cent of the students were given one or more additional tests.

Most common reading problems included vocabulary (87 per cent), sentence reading (76 per cent), skimming (75 per cent), and reading speed (60 per cent). Others noted often were library skills, reading-reasoning, paragraph reading, and textbook reading. More than half of the students additionally had serious problems in spelling and writing.

OBJECTIVES

Objectives of the program are arbitrarily divided into two categories, counseling and reading, for purposes of this paper. They are interrelated, of course, and quite detailed so that students might elect to concentrate on those which best fitted their own concepts of their needs. (24) They were discussed with students during the initial test report and recommendation interviews and re-evaluated throughout the semester in progress report interviews. Objectives were behaviorally stated, but are listed here in briefer form.

Counseling:

A. Self-analysis
   - To survey own strengths and limitations in reading
   - To analyze physical factors and attitudes that affect reading

B. Study skills
   - To explore ways to:
     - -concentrate better
     - -remember better
     - -survey a textbook
     - -skim through material effectively
     - -work within time limits
     - -improve test performance

C. Self-responsibility
   - To establish priorities among family, job, school, and personal commitments
   - To examine own long- and short-term goals
   - To develop a workable study schedule

D. Liaison with other college classes
   - To have an opportunity to discuss academic assignments, term papers, preparation for tests, and classroom problems with the counselor-reading specialist and in small groups

E. Personal problems
   - To have an opportunity to discuss personality conflicts, adjustment to college life, and other personal problems with the counselor-reading specialist and in small groups

Reading:

A. Rate
   - To practice reading faster or slower, for different purposes

B. Comprehension
   - To practice the SQ3R method of improving comprehension
   - To practice relating this method to college texts

C. Vocabulary
   - To practice increasing vocabulary, particularly that related to current college courses

D. Flexibility
   - To practice developing more than one way of reading
   - To read a variety of materials designed to widen reading background

E. Analytical reading
To explore ways of
-understanding the author's point of view
-anticipating what is going to happen
-recognizing false reasoning

PROCEDURES

The major purpose of counseling was to convince each student (a) that he was an interesting, worthwhile person (31), and (b) that he could and would be helped to improve his ability to do his college work. (26) With this in mind, the program was structured to allow many short individual conferences, as well as small group experiences, and additionally was coordinated with several sensitivity groups in the counseling center.

Test and progress report interviews began with the initial reading test and continued throughout the semester, on the completion of each 20 hours lab work. These were both group and individual sessions. In group sessions, reading problems of mutual concern and test fears, setting of priorities, time-scheduling, and carry-over skills learned in lab to other classes were considered. Individual sessions were concerned with helping the student analyze his own strengths and limitations, emotional barriers to learning, study-skills and self-responsibility development, and a re-evaluation of long and short-term goals.

Short individual conferences with each student took place from one to three times weekly, as the rest of the group worked independently. Students talked over their progress in college classes, difficulties arising in preparations, establishing study schedules, orientation to college life, family and job conflicts, and personal problems during these brief sessions. Obviously the limited time demanded early and warm rapport, and each interview related to only one or two of the areas mentioned. Effort to foster the development of a positive self-concept was made on each contact with the student, through interest in the student and his concerns, appreciation of something about him as a person, and praise for his accomplishments, however small. (25)

Ten per cent of the students slipped almost immediately into a personal counseling relationship, came often for additional counseling sessions in their free time, and also were involved in group counseling with another counselor. Fifteen per cent accepted the opportunity for occasional discussion of personal problems, coming for additional sessions two or more times. Thirty per cent of the group were involved in the sensitivity groups on campus, in addition to the lab counseling.

A strongly counseling-oriented part of the program was the communication paragraphs which students wrote weekly. These were short personal communications of feelings and ideas, with no comment on grammar, punctuation, or sentence structure. Students were introduced

to this task with a highly persuasive discussion of (a) the importance of their thoughts and feelings, (b) the relationship between verbalizing one's feelings and mental health (14), and (c) being able to express one's ideas vis a vis being able to perceive and understand feelings and thoughts in what one reads.

Since most of the students had had previous unhappy experiences with writing, as well as reading, they were often hesitant about this assignment in the beginning. But immediate return of their papers with positive written comments and the counselor's enthusiastic response to the variety and impact of their ideas encouraged them to continue. The short length and freedom from criticism was another stimulus. Paragraphs were never read or discussed with the total group, but were the source of open-ended discussion with the counselor-reading specialist, sometimes leading to exploration of causes and effects of feelings discussed. About one-third of the students seemed to find this a cathartic experience (17) and wrote much more lengthy or frequent paragraphs. Students who at first found it difficult to communicate verbally, became notably more adept at expressing their problems following several weeks of communication paragraphs.

Although each student had an individual diagnosis of his reading problems, and an individual "contract" of practice work to do, students were encouraged to work together in pairs and small groups whenever they had mutual problems. Being able to help some students, realizing that others had the same kinds of problems, and having opportunities to develop a working team relationship helped to develop a needed feeling of responsibility, of cooperation, and of mutual supportiveness.

READING IMPROVEMENT TECHNIQUES

A rather structured "contract" method was used, to offer students individualized improvement of reading skills in a series of small sequential steps in which they could achieve success (32), and to allow time for individual counseling conferences while other students were working. Contracts, developed from needs shown by the initial reading test and by the students' own diagnoses of skills wanted, listed specific workbook exercises and equipment to be used, communication paragraphs to be written, and suggested home practice. (7) Survey of the students' texts from other college courses was also part of the contract. (4) (7) Each contract was for a basic period of 20 lab hours, with recommended minimum practice, and 25% of the students did more than their contracts required.

Rationale for the individualized contract approach, and the mid-term re-evaluation and development of a new contract may be found in Schick's summary of research on college reading programs, where he states that the most effective and enduring of reading programs are based: "first, on detailed analysis of specific needs of students...; second, on selection of the most useful printed matter and mechanical teaching aids to enable

each student to eliminate his own deficiencies; and third ... on continually modified instructional techniques, materials, and devices to the end that reading skills, habits, and achievement are developed to the very limits of every student's native capacity". (26)

Home practice for all students included vocabulary and a speed and comprehension exercise, with the recommendation that students practice 15-30 minutes per day. Findings of research indicate that regular, short practice sessions yield greater gains than infrequent longer ones (15); but more importantly, the distaste with which most of these reluctant readers faced any kind of reading assignment, and the extreme pressure on handicapped college readers to find time just to complete assigned reading for their regular classes, dictated this type of home practice.

Vocabulary practice was based upon Fernald's Kinesthetic method. (11) Words for each practice were selected by the student - from his college courses, his reading, lectures, TV, and conversations. Students were urged to choose words of multiple meanings used in a way new to them, words familiar vaguely but not definable, and specific vocabulary of the different disciplines. A minimum of three new words each time the student came to reading lab was recommended, and some students brought five to ten additional words each time. Since these words were kept for practice until the student had correctly identified them at three successive lab periods, the vocabulary load per student averaged from nine to thirty words per week. Choice of the Fernald method was based on the assumption that usual vocabulary improvement techniques had been of little help to these students in the past, and on research implications of the need for over-learning vocabulary. (1) Emphasis on words selected by the students, particularly from their college texts, is also reinforced by research. (20)

All comprehension exercises were used with the time-honored SQ3R method (22), in which the student surveys the material, asks himself a question about it, reads it, recites or writes main facts, and reviews. An ABCD series of comprehension questions was developed by the writer to help students elicit main facts from everything they read. Transfer of this method to reading of college texts was discussed and practiced, with frequent review of the SQ3R method as it was adapted to different types of materials.

Because of the wide range of students' reading abilities and needs, a very large collection of different kinds of workbooks, exercises, texts, magazines, newspapers, and paperbacks was made available in the lab. The only mechanical teaching aids consisted of the SRA Reading Accelerator (29) and the Controlled Reader, Jr. (9) with filmstrips GH, IJ, and KL. They served a motivational purpose for some students, helped to vary the routine and add interest, and were available for individual use in free time. With the limited budget for the program, mechanical devises were near the bottom of the list of recommended materials, since research gives little evidence that available instruments produce greater improvement than other approaches.

SUMMARY

A longitudinal study of GPA fluctuations and continuance at Chapman College was begun, and presently indicates that these students did improve GPA's and remain at Chapman College in larger numbers than previous groups of such students who entered with probational or provisional standing. The Hawthorne effect of any new program (30) as well as the efforts of student personnel services to provide some special help for all these students of course affect this trend.

Subjective student reactions, although they lack precision and reflect feeling rather than measurable facts, may be said to be of some value, (10) and are strongly favorable to the program. Seventy-three per cent reported carryover of reading skills to other college courses; eighty-nine per cent mentioned better understanding of themselves, their reading problems, and their study habits; and ninety-five per cent felt that the vocabulary study had been of noticeable help to them. More than half of the students voluntarily referred to the program as important verification of Chapman's image as a small college which does give time and attention to the individual.

Retests with a different form of the Iowa Silent Reading Test, Advanced, showed that students gained from six to forty-three percentiles on the median test score. All but seven per cent showed significant gains in reading vocabulary, skimming, and sentence reading. Students who completed a second twenty hours showed greater gains the second time, and predictably, those students who were the best readers in the beginning gained the most. (15)

Research findings that a program combining remedial reading with counseling "improves both the reading performance and the personality or behavior of retarded readers" (10) are reinforced by informal observation of these students and their behavior patterns in the following categories: participation in constructive campus activities. number of times cited for disciplinary action, improvement of GPA, and continuance at college.

Improvement of self-concept (28) (46) (33) and changes in reading behavior such as modification of hostile and resentful attitudes toward authors and books, increase of experiential background in reading, increase in voluntary reading, development of interest in words and their meanings, and improvement in ability to express ideas in writing and to write an organized paragraph were observed with significant frequency. These changes were also reported by the students in almost every case.

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